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SUBJECT: ESTONIA GEARS UP FOR PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In the run-up to presidential elections five of Estonia's six major political parties have agreed to try to find a common candidate from a slate of twelve nominees. The first round of voting is scheduled for a special session of parliament in August. If no single candidate wins a two-thirds majority in parliament, voting will move to an electoral college consisting of MPs and local government representatives. An institution with fairly limited formal powers, the Estonian presidency has been defined in the years since Estonian re-independence by its holders. The relatively low profile of current President Arnold Ruutel has left some Estonians longing for a candidate in the mold of the late Lennart Meri. End Summary.

ELECTING A PRESIDENT

¶2. (U) Given the relatively fragmented nature of Estonian party politics, rallying a two-thirds majority of Parliament (68 votes out of 101) around a single candidate has proven impossible in the fifteen years since Estonian re-independence. Should parliament again deadlock this August, the decision will go to an Electoral College comprised of MPs and local government council representatives. The winner there requires 50% plus one vote, and it is quite possible for a winning candidate to be elected President without having been nominated in Parliament or winning the support of a majority of MPs.

¶3. (SBU) Five of the six parties in Parliament -- Pro Patria Union, Res Publica, Reform, Center Party and the Social Democrats -- have agreed publicly to find a mutually acceptable Presidential candidate with the objective of avoiding a second round in the Electoral College. (People's Union, of which President Ruutel was a member, says it will focus its energies on the electoral college.) Collectively the five parties have put forward twelve candidates for consideration. The list is to be winnowed during a series of meetings in coming months. The group includes:

- a member of the European Parliament (Toomas Hendrik Ilves) and five MPs (Speaker Toomas Varek, Enn Eesmaa, Ene Ergma, Liina Tonisson and Peeter Tulviste);
- two businessmen (Jaan Manitski and Eesti Telekom Chairman Jaan Mannik);
- three national and local government figures (Minister of Population and Ethnic Affairs Paul-Eerik Rummo, Tartu Mayor Laine Janes and Tartu City Council Chairman Aadu Must); and
- Tartu University Rector Jaak Aaviksoo

IN PARLIAMENT OR THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE?

14. (SBU) Opinion polls show MEP and former Foreign Minister Toomas-Hendrik Ilves to be the most popular candidate with the public (tallying 29% in a recent poll). He is also the only nominee to attract support from three of the five parties. Until recently both People's Union and Center Party -- which, combined, have a blocking minority for a parliamentary vote -- indicated they would not back an Ilves candidacy. More recently the Center Party has softened its line. Nevertheless, rumors abound that People's Union and Center have done a deal to take the vote to the Electoral College where they believe they have a majority.

15. (SBU) President Ruutel has yet to decide whether he will seek re-election, though recent appearances on the hustings have prompted speculation that the 77 year old will in fact run. With support from People's Union and Center, Ruutel would stand a good chance of winning in the Electoral College. What Center would get in return for supporting Ruutel is unclear, though Party Chairman Edgar Savisaar would doubtless exact a price for supporting Ruutel.

THE SHADOW OF LENNART MERI

16. (SBU) The passing of former President Lennart Meri in March, and the subsequent high-profile state funeral attended by presidents and former prime ministers, threw into stark relief the contrast between Meri and President Ruutel. At the time (and prior to his own nomination) MP Enn Eesmaa told the Ambassador that Latvian President Vike-Freiberga seemed to have inherited from Meri the mantle of informal international

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spokesperson of the Baltic states. Eesmaa expressed the hope that someone of similar stature would emerge to better represent Estonia, but acknowledged that the system favors candidates who are least offensive, rather than most charismatic.

17. (SBU) If the election goes to the Electoral College (with its strong local flavor), the common touch will be critical. Res Publica MP Urmas Reinsalu told us recently that both People's Union and the Center Party have a strong advantage at that level, in part because their parties control ministries that can "deliver the goodies" (Economy, Agriculture, Social Affairs, etc.). While Res Publica could support Ilves, Reinsalu said the party would also look to find a candidate with broader appeal for the Electoral College. Tartu University Rector Jaak Aviksoo might fit that bill, he thought.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) In terms of U.S. interests the outcome of the 2007 parliamentary elections will be of considerable more importance than this summer's presidential election. But although the powers of the Estonian president are limited, President Meri showed that a combination of bully pulpit, willingness to stretch the interpretation of presidential authority, erudition, and plain old charm and wit can make the institution count, and help Estonia to punch above its weight in the international arena. While we don't see anyone close to Meri in the current crop of candidates, the urbane (and Penn/Columbia-educated) Ilves probably comes closest, though whether he could win in either the Parliament or the Electoral College is debatable. Should Ilves emerge victorious, we can expect him to carve out a more robust role for the presidency in Estonian foreign policy than has been the case over the

past five years.

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